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SECRET/NFD/BUO--SITUATION IN ETHIOPIA

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OCI No. 0440/75

CENTRAL INTELLIGENCE AGENCY
Directorate of Intelligence
March 7, 1975

MICROFILMED

MEMORANDUM

SUBJECT: Situation In Ethiopia

The following situation report on Ethiopia is to be passed to NSC staff officer Robert Oakley with Secretary's Kissinger's party.

Text: The fighting in Eritrea continues inconclusively; both the government and the rebels are maintaining their uncompromising political positions. The ruling military council's ability to direct government operations in Eritrea and at the same time cope with the many other manifestations of political dissidence throughout Ethiopia is becoming increasingly doubtful. While the likelihood of a coup by military officers in Addis Ababa--the most serious potential threat to the council--appears to have lessened for the time being, opposition from tribal-based civilians, some of whom presumably have allies in the military, is increasing.

The Eritrean conflict is beginning to show signs of settling into the pattern of drawn-out and inconclusive struggle that marked earlier rebel campaigns. Skirmishing, with periods of more intense fighting, between government forces and guerrillas are likely to continue for some time, however. Most of the fighting has occurred around Asmara and along the roads from Asmara to Karen and the Red Sea port of Massawa. Ground resupply of government forces in Eritrea continues to be hampered by maintenance problems and rebel interdiction of roads. No critical logistical problems are apparent, but fuel reserves are low and individual units have reported ammunition shortages.

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Arab countries are continuing to provide enough military and other support to enable the rebels to keep their operations going. At this point most Arab governments are not solidly backing the rebel demand for complete independence, but the Ethiopian government's evident intention to seek a military solution is pushing them in that direction. Only Syria and Kuwait are vociferously calling for Eritrean independence. Arms are being supplied by Libya and probably Syria and Iraq as well. Persistent reports that Palestinian experts are helping the rebels inside Eritrea remain unconfirmed. Most Arab supplies are sent first to South Yemen, and then by dhows to landings along the Red Sea coast. [REDACTED] Sudan has refused to allow rebel arms to cross its borders, but it has allowed the transit of medical supplies.

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Saudi Arabia, Libya, Egypt, and Sudan still prefer a negotiated settlement, probably within the framework of a federated status for Eritrea. These and other Arab governments tend to blame the military council's intransigence more than the rebels' insistence on independence for the current bleak prospects for a compromise solution.

The council has recently adopted a more favorable attitude toward Sudanese President Numayri's peace proposal. [REDACTED]

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[REDACTED] a government delegation will leave "soon" for discussions in Khartoum; no dates have been mentioned. The Ethiopians apparently are willing to talk with rebel representatives as well as the Sudanese. The prospects for productive negotiations nonetheless remain slim. The Ethiopians probably envisage only preliminary discussion, and may be planning the visit mainly as a delaying tactic. They believe Numayri is already allowing rebel arms into Eritrea from Sudan, and have serious reservations about his ability to act as a neutral mediator. Numayri has called for talks without preconditions, but the Ethiopians continue to maintain that discussions must be held within the framework of national unity. The rebels, for their part, are holding to their demand that the government recognize Eritrea's right to independence before negotiations begin.

The council has been initially successful in rallying popular support behind the war effort. It

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has been helped by the official media's increased denunciation of Arab support for the Eritreans; Syria has been singled out for particularly bitter attacks. These condemnations are evoking the desired response from Ethiopians, who have a traditional fear of "Arab encirclement." Potential leaders of a military coup apparently have decided to hold off, probably because they fear any move now would invite accusations that they were sabotaging the military effort and playing into the hands of foreign enemies.

In the long run, the Eritrean conflict may strengthen the hand of military dissidents. The young officers and enlisted men on the council have had to rely on the few remaining senior officers in the military to restore effective command and control over the undisciplined and poorly led troops in Eritrea. Most of the senior officers oppose the council's radical policies, but they have felt powerless and impotent. Their confidence seems to have revived, and they may now become more active in their opposition to the council.

Opposition groups outside the military are still active and attempting to consolidate their support in the provinces. They will be strengthened by landowners and peasants who oppose the council's recently announced land reform program. Dissidents from the Galla tribe, who apparently are attempting to organize insurrections in the countryside, comprise one of the most important groups. They are led by Tadessa Biru, who was arrested in 1966 for his part in the Galla revolt but was later released. Some Galla army officers, two of whom were staff members of the council, defected to the group last week. The Galla are the largest single ethnic group in Ethiopia, but they are largely dispersed throughout the country.

Conservative opponents of the council from the Amhara and Tigre tribes are continuing their uprisings in several of the northern provinces. Although the Galla and the Amhara are traditional rivals, it is possible they will decide to work together to bring about the overthrow of the council. The crucial test of their unity would come after the council was ousted; each tribe would be sensitive to indications that it was being excluded from power in the central government.

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According to one source, Tadessa and an Amhara dissident leader have, in fact, agreed to coordinate their groups' efforts against the council. Leaders of both tribes reportedly believe that an Amhara-Galla power struggle is senseless and unnecessary.

The council expects its land reform program to lead to large-scale violence, but it is confident its own position in the end will be strengthened. The council, however, is probably overrating its ability to control events and misjudging the consequences of widespread disorder. The council's attempt to nationalize all agricultural land could transform incipient uprisings into full-scale rebellions. The army, spread thin because of its involvement in Eritrea, would be hard pressed to put down the revolts. The loyalty of the many officers who are landowners would be in doubt. A further weakening of the council's position will probably stimulate further coup plotting by dissident military officers.

Other civil disturbances are adding to the council's problems. In recent weeks there has been a sharp increase in reports of local residents killing or attacking students sent into the countryside to teach literacy and engage in rural development work. Tribal frictions have led to fighting among some students, and many are deserting the campaign. These incidents will harden the opposition of parents to the council. Tribal fighting is spreading in southern Ethiopia, and incidents of rural banditry are increasing throughout the country.

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